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ABSTRACT

Using a textualist approach (looking at meaning above and beyond overt message elements), a study examined televised public service announcements (PSAs) about Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) produced by the Ad Council and the United States Department of Health and Human Services. Both ads identify young people who should be concerned about the disease as only heterosexual. By ignoring the homosexual, the message becomes not one which educates teenagers in general, but rather one which constitutes the relevant, natural subject as the subject who engages in heterosexual activity. In the Ad Council PSA, the Council communicates an educative message about the dangers of drugs and the HIV infection. AIDS then comes to be defined not primarily as a medical problem, but rather as a social problem, like drugs--AIDS is defined as a punishment that befalls those members of the society who deviate from societal norms. In the government ads, specific information about AIDS is withheld and can only be obtained by calling a toll free phone number. Beyond the educative function of the phone, other avenues here seem to be films designed and shaped for specific psychographic and demographic audiences, the most recent direction the national health and gay organizations are taking. Communication researchers can follow two directions: study the power relationships and discursive practices in more detailed educational messages targeted at specific audiences; and examine ways of designing messages, primarily for a mass audience, which empower the voice of the gay community. (Contains 30 references.) (RS)

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Representation of AIDS in Televised Public Service Announcements: The Discursive Practices of Government in the Constitution of Knowledge about AIDS

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ABSTRACT

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Roger Myrick, Nikos Trivoulidis,
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Existing research into televised public service announcements having to do with AIDS focuses on traditional effects. But this research fails to take into account the extent to which factors external to the explicit messages in the PSAs impact upon the viewing audience. In their research, the authors examine PSAs produced by the Ad Council and the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services in light of Shaprio's (1981; 1984) textualist approach--which looks at meaning which exists above and beyond overt message elements in a given communication. When examining the PSAs in light of this textualist approach, the authors demonstrate how the PSAs mythologize the AIDS message, place the government in the position of AIDS information dissemination source, and disenfranchise non-mainstream homosexuals from the process.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Research has shown that televised public service messages are helpful in that they can deliver general information to general audiences (Market Facts, 1979; Blosser & Roberts, 1985; Bosommpra, 1989; Hanneman & McEwen, 1973; O'Keefe, 1985; Stroman & Seltzer, 1989). More than $700 million worth of television air time is set aside annually in the U.S. for PSAs (Garbett, 1981; Sandage, Fryburger, and Rotzoll, 1983). PSAs dealing with the subject of AIDS air over stations in all the major television markets in the U.S. as well as overseas ("American Advertising Federation . . .", 1989, p. C9; Toufexis, 1987).

To date, the vast majority of communication research on these AIDS PSAs focuses on traditional effects studies. In order to do an effective analysis on this effects research, however, one must examine the questions researchers are asking about PSAs on AIDS. When studying the effects of PSAs and other television programming, for instance, Blosser and Roberts look at the question of viewer comprehension. They report generally high comprehension of narrative content of TV spots "even by the youngest children" (1985, p. 455). Repetition of televised spots can aid in learning (Just, Crigler, & Wallach, 1990). But it has been shown that viewers do not always correctly perceive the intent of the broadcasts they view (Blosser & Roberts, 1985). Whereas it's easy to disseminate information about AIDS, the

research suggests inciting behavioral change is much more complicated. Changes in behavior, especially where sexual behavior is concerned, are linked to "deep biological and psychological drives and desires" (Robert et al., 1986, p. 15), and thus difficult to alter.

Previous researchers have looked at the question of factors external to the message that produce an effect on the audience. These researchers have found that, in order to create the most favorable climate for influencing behavioral change through AIDS-related PSAs, one must take into account the critical role interpersonal communication plays in the process (Cohen, Guiguet, Weills, & Balleron, 1990; Rukarangira, Ngirabakunzi, Bihimik & Kitembo, 1990). One must also consider the relationship of a positive self-image and the management off conflict within the individual viewer's experience (Edgar, Hammond, and Freimuth, 1989).

Catania, Kegeles, and Coates found that there seems to be a need for a focus on the labelling of high-risk AIDS behaviors, combined with acquisition of individual personal commitment to changing those behaviors and an identification of social support programs which can help reduce the risk of HIV infection (1990). Those targeted for behavioral change should see themselves as active participants in a targeted group for which the AIDS information is specifically prepared (deFrancesco, Austin, Bordowitz, Carlomusto, & Hoskins, 1990; Van Dan, 1989).

Alcalay's research shows behavior modelling should be a part of the process (1983), as does Remafedi, who goes on to indicate that the effort should include building of social supports, self-esteem and positive identity (1988). When engaging the question of behavioral changes in the audience, Maibach found participants in his (1990) AIDS prevention research were most likely to develop new low-risk behavior patterns when involved in a presentation featuring information dissemination, modelling, and rehearsal. Viewers Maibach surveyed who were subject to AIDS information alone showed the least improvement in their at-risk behaviors (Maibach, 1990).

Further research asserts that television, as a medium, is unable to effectively address the specific behaviors associated with AIDS prevention (Grube & Boheme-Duerr, 1988; Strohman & Seltzer, 1988). This research demonstrates quite effectively that programming alone, especially programming which portrays the fight against AIDS and HIV infection in television's typically generic, inexplicit, and stereotypically mainstream way, is insufficient to incite behavioral change because it does not address the many issues associated with the HIV virus and AIDS in ways that make a direct connection with those most likely to be at risk.

The approaches taken by existing research are certainly significant and useful, but they miss the point because they look primarily for direct cause-effect relationships between the

message, the audience, and changes in the audience's behavior. Traditional effects research treats objects and active subjects in the communicative act as existing independently of the message, and thus offers a rather unproblematic account of the message itself. The result is a mystification of the production of the subjects and objects; messages appear depoliticized and innocuously uninformative. Assumptions about the production of meaning go unquestioned--supporting existing power relationships which define the nature of knowledge. These power relationships, and their productive capabilities, lie at the core of the communication act.

What is needed is an analysis of the message at the level of discourse which examines the constitutive power of language in the creation and representation of objects, subjects, and knowledge--focusing on the power relationships at work which contribute to the constitution of meaning. This approach, called textualism, allows for the demystification of subjects, objects and knowledge, showing the fullness of their linguistic and political construction. This approach thus acts to politicize the message by analyzing the way the text produces and expresses meaning.

METHODOLOGY

What would such an analysis look like? Shapiro (1981; 1984) provides a conceptually coherent picture of such an analysis with his textualist approach to political communication--treating discourse as the most basic unit of analysis.

When accounting for textualism as a legitimate approach for the social scientist, Shapiro's most fundamental task is to explain the exact understanding of political communication and its relationship to discourse, power and knowledge. Shapiro defines political as "those processes which involve sanctioned individual and collective control over valued experience . . ." (1981, p. 211) exercised not through the direct will of a sovereign nor through legal proscriptions but through the creation of objects and persons. "Power is immanent, therefore, in rules that constitute these persons and things" (1981, p. 218).

Discursive practices constitute particular persons as agents, or manipulators, of what is considered to be knowledge, or valuable/relevant/intelligible phenomena. The discursive practices also constitute the actual rules that can be used to theoretically and methodologically understand, conceive of, and distinguish what can be considered knowledge--from that which is not considered to be knowledge. This constitutive aspect of the

discursive practice ultimately relies on the power of the discourse to delineate what can and cannot be thought about.

The definition and focus offered by Shapiro succeed in treating political communication seriously by stressing the activity of the negotiation of power as identified in discourse.

Shapiro organizes his criteria and assumptions by establishing initially that experience is experience only because of the discourse used to represent and name experience. In other words, everything is contained in and constituted by discourse. It follows that, from this perspective, discourse also creates human beings through figures of speech and provides the opportunity for representation (constituting ourselves). Probably the most essential assumption imbedded in this definition is that it foregrounds and privileges discourse as the ultimate "reality" as well as the way we can talk about "reality." There is no pre-existing moment or experience. Furthermore, Shapiro is committed to the idea that language uses people rather than vice versa, a notion which can be traced to Heidegger. The methodological consequences of such and approach is the treatment of all texts as literary. Shapiro is thus able to maintain his focus on language and its productive power because the literary is primarily concerned with language's power to produce the phenomenon of fiction.

To implement this approach, Shapiro maintains that we must understand the relationships, rules, and practices at work within

the discursive practice that give rise to concepts and objects; this "requires an analysis of such things as professional boundaries and role allocation implicit in concepts and the rules that link them with objects. . . (in other words) what everything is organized around (1981, p. 154).

What specific questions can the researcher ask about the discursive practice? First, the researcher can look for the use of tropes and figures of speech which constitute phenomena in the discourse; what do the metaphors bring together to produce what is considered to be knowledge and phenomena (as Eisenstein does with his theory of montage in film)? In terms of his analysis of an actual text, Shapiro (1984) examines the figure of speech used to constitute objects, subjects--as agents of power, and what can be considered as knowledge in a governmental document written by an FBI agent which explains the purpose of his agency. Shapiro shows how, through the unquestioned use of metaphors, the text reifies the legitimacy of a governmental organization and activity. Shapiro's is a direct attempt to demystify and politicize a text that claims to be extra-literary; he is thus able to focus on the productive power of discourse and not on the text as a container of hidden meaning. For Shapiro, the question is not to uncover hidden meaning but to explore the production of meaning within the text.

Textual Analysis

The PSAs we selected for analysis are recent attempts by two organizations, the Ad Council and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, to address a teenage audience--a group which is currently one of the fastest growing segments to be infected by the HIV virus. What concerns the textual analyst here is the consequence of the discursive practices in the PSAs which create subjects and objects through the representation of characters, AIDS, and narration.

In the PSAs from the Ad Council, the PSAs communicate the general message that AIDS is deadly, that it comes from being irresponsible with drugs, and that it affects heterosexual teenagers. The Ad Council uses a very stylized, MTV-esque production approach, one that foregrounds and juxtaposes post-nuclear settings and gothic colors.

What subjects do the discursive practices in the messages create? First and most obvious, subjects are heterosexual--as indicated by the heterosexual encounters in which they are engaged. The consequence of this focus is that it identifies people who should be concerned about the disease as only heterosexual; that the subjects that the audience should be concerned about are heterosexual. The ramifications of discursively privileging one particular sexual preference and ignoring another, the homosexual, works to naturalize and

mythologize this sexual activity. These PSAs give the impression that knowledge about AIDS is the right of the heterosexual; hetrosexuals own this knowledge. Conversely, the homosexual is excluded from this knowledge and from the definition of AIDS provided in the PSA's discourse. So, the message becomes not one which addresses and educates teenagers in general, but rather one which constitutes the relevant, natural subject as the subject which engages in heterosexual activity.

The first PSA examined opens with a roving close-up shot of what is depicted as either a beach--or layers of red, blue and orange ooze. The camera slowly pans up the bare stiff leg of a woman lying on the surface of the beach (ooze?). As the camera pans up the body of the woman, the video image depicts the movement of a male onto the female, and they engage in an erotic interaction. As this is happening, the voice-over tells viewers that drugs can cloud judgment and enable one to forget about or disregard safe sex practices. The message states that in such instances of irresponsibility, the blame rests with the woman. . . who pays the ultimate price. As a result of this encounter which we have witnessed, the woman will be infected, and she will die.

Beyond the heterosexuality of the subjects, the video images of the PSA depict a female subject who, for all practical purposes, is already "dead". . . with the camera panning slowly up her stiff, motionless leg. This would be consistent with

Shaprio's findings, in that he claims subjects are constituted as subjects when they are in positions of control; objects are objects which are depicted as phenomena acted upon by the subject. In the Ad Council PSA, the Ad Council communicates an educative message about the dangers of drugs and the HIV infection. Simultaneously the PSA constitutes the subjects in a complex way. The subjects in the PSA are not the characters on the beach; rather the subjects, the phenomena in control, are the disease, drugs, and the narrator. When the PSA begins with a focus on a seemingly dead limb, the suggestion is made that the disease has already asserted control over the human character. More importantly, the association between drugs and AIDS is explicit as the dominant message of the ad; by taking drugs, the characters' judgment is impaired which leads to unsafe and irresponsible sexual activity.

With an association of drug use and sex, the discourse works to define AIDS in the discourse of the government's "War on Drugs"--an established social program. AIDS as a subject then comes to be defined not primarily as a medical problem, but rather as a social problem, like drugs. AIDS is defined as a punishment that falls on those members of the society that deviate from societal norms. The implication of defining AIDS as a social problem, rather than as a biological malfunction, is that the emphasis is placed on a condemnation of a particular

lifestyle--rather that on the disease itself and the medical and governmental inability to deal with the disease and its affects.

The PSA would ask us to accept that the individual is responsible for prevention of the disease. . . no responsibility falls on the shoulders of government or the medical community. The discourse thus defines not only what AIDS is, but also identifies the agent of power who should be concerned and responsible for the prevention of the disease.

The absence of the homosexual from the ad implies an even further sequestering of independent voices; not only is the homosexual unimportant in terms of concern and responsibility, but the homosexual's lifestyle is beyond hope, and cannot aid in defining, negotiating and preventing the disease. What we observe here is a contradiction in the definition of knowledge. On one hand, AIDS, like drugs--is a social problem. But on the other hand, the state or any other form of organized authority--is not responsible for it. The responsibility lies with the individual, and his/her lifestyle. . . as long as that lifestyle is a heterosexual one.

The most explicit attempt to define AIDS as a subject can be found in the syntax of the copy at the end of the ad which claims that AIDS can kill. In this one sentence, the subject is AIDS and the implied direct object is the heterosexual couple on the beach. We are told that "AIDS can kill", and we are asked to "learn more about AIDS." While these two messages are not

necessarily contradictory, we identify two different discursive practices at work; AIDS is constituted as a subject which controls the object, and AIDS is constituted as an object which can be controlled by a heterosexual subject.

Essential to the above definition of AIDS as both subject and object is the function of the narrator. For example, when the ad begins, we see waves splashing on the blue and red florescent beach; then as the camera beings its slow pan the waves recede, suggesting that life, associated with the ocean, can only be recaptured by heeding and complying with knowledge as defined by the discourse in the message. The alternative lies in the red, blood-like sand of the beach on which rests the lifeless limb of a woman. In conjunction with this image, the music played is threatening, Wagnerian, suggesting impending doom, war, darkness, again the consequence of a failure to acknowledge the power and legitimacy of the discourse which constitutes the ad.

As the camera begins it pan, the narrator's voice seems to rise out of the threatening music. The narrator's tone is severe, authoritative, and again, threatening. The narrator's tone thus becomes legitimized and knowledgeable because of the fear and attention it provokes. The narrator at first seems to be constituted as an educator on prevention; however, the narrator simultaneously focuses his message on the correlation between drugs and AIDS. This second focus can certainly be read as preventative, but the prevention is linguistically

accomplished by defining the subject of AIDS as relevant in the context of the social and governmental "war on drugs" as a pre-existing and legitimate problem. The consequence of this particular use of a prevention discourse is the mythologizing of the message and the definitions which comprise the message; mythologizing has the further consequence of normalizing, thus depoliticizing, the images constructed in the ad.

An additional discourse of power can also be identified as the narrator focuses on and defines knowledge as relevant and necessary for the heterosexual, thus negating the homosexual. The subjugation of the latter lifestyle is clearly a political move--because one group is constituted as being inherently more powerful than another, the key element in Shapiro's definition of the term political.

In sum, we identify a plurality of discursive practices at work that succeed not in simply educating a mass audience, but in defining who that audience is, what counts as knowledge for that audience, and ultimately what vocabulary that audience can use to both discuss this issue and to discuss themselves.

In the two remaining PSAs from the Ad Council, we observe the same discursive attempts to constitute subject and objects and reinforce the power of the narrator and sponsor. One significant difference is worth noting: in the second ad entitled "car," the responsible agent is identified as the male. The female appears as the responsible agent in the other two PSAs.

Interestingly, in the PSAs in which the female is charged with the responsibility, the dominant images associated with the female are the elements of water and air; conversely, when the male is charged with responsibility the dominant associative image is a car. Through the use of these metaphors to define male and female agency, the discourse again seems to naturalize and depoliticize power relationships and control.

The other set of PSAs examined was produced under the authority of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, under the guise of the slogan "America Responds to AIDS." In general, the same constitution and freeplay of subjects, objects and power appears here that was already discovered in the PSAs from the Ad Council. However, several differences are worth noting.

One striking difference between the PSAs from the two sources rests with the Ad Council's emphasis on visual technique to create an image of AIDS that is palatable to a mass audience; safe sex is imagined as a commodity that can and should be consumed by heterosexuals. In the Health and Human Services PSAs, the production techniques serve more as background for the people in the PSAs, the subjects. One consequence of this difference of production-emphasis is that the government's PSAs seem to represent a more "realistic" look at AIDS, one that is more "natural" and consequently legitimate than the post-nuclear discourse of the Ad Council's message.

A second difference can be identified with the positioning of the characters as narrators in the messages. The characters in the "America Responds to AIDS" PSAs are represented as controlling the narrative; there is no omniscient narrator (as in the Ad Council PSAs), with the exception of a PSA dealing with IV drug use. Instead, the characters are constituted as talking heads through the use of close-up shots in familiar settings. These production techniques seem to empower those subjects, at least temporarily, with the ability and the discourse to talk about AIDS. The characters, in most cases, appear to be the holders of knowledge about the disease and its prevention. However, in each case, the character withholds critical information about AIDS prevention and treatment. This element of the message, which constitutes knowledge about AIDS, is reserved for the government's voice--specific information is not provided in the PSA and can only be obtained by calling the government agency's toll free telephone number presented at the end of the PSA.

In short, viewers are deceived! While it seems initially that the characters--as subjects--are going to talk about AIDS, no such information is provided. The ability to actually engage in discourse on this subject is limited; it remains situated and organized around the government's discourse of itself as protector of a citizenship. The consequence is that the characters who seem to be constituted as subjects with knowledge

are again relegated to the position of passive object until they engage in the government's discourse. This renders the government voice as the most legitimate and powerful. . . unquestioned and uncontested.

Finally, it's important to note the nature of information that the government offers as knowledge. The PSAs imply that the government holds knowledge about what constitutes safe sexual activity. However, the sexual activity is of a particular kind. Congress has passed the Helms Act, which prohibits the distribution of federal funds to agencies which discuss explicit homosexual activities. The consequence of this action is that the definition of "safe" sexuality includes only a heterosexual lifestyle. This particular lifestyle is being discussed in a number of PSAs, including one in which a character calls for a coalition of educators and parents to advocate and teach the heterosexual lifestyle as the healthy lifestyle. The implication here is that heterosexuality contains within it the possibility for healthy safe sex, and consequently the prevention of AIDS; homosexuality offers no possibility for healthy sexual activity or freedom from AIDS.

Thus, the prevention of AIDS is organized around and defined by acceptable sexual preference, rather than around the activity of promiscuity which exists in both the homosexual and heterosexual lifestyle. While the PSAs seem to explicitly offer general information on AIDS prevention and the need for awareness

about safe sex, they implicitly advocate and define what is considered to be "natural" sexual preference. The government therefore defines what is considered to be an acceptable picture of healthy sexual activity. And as we saw with the earlier PSAs, AIDS is constituted as an object that can be dealt with only for and by those who engage in sanctioned sexual practice. Moreover, the voice here is the voice of the government; interestingly, the voice of the government is less present in the government's PSAs than it is in the Ad Council's PSAs. The Health and Human Services Department PSAs take on the voice of the people, the citizens, and the intrusion of the government's voice seems muted.

It's important to note that in this second group of PSAs the prevention of AIDS is associated with talking about the disease. However, as noted earlier, when the characters begin to talk, the narrator takes over the discourse--to indicate to the audience that discourse can only begin when the audience member takes the initiative of dailing the provided toll-free telephone number.

While talking about AIDS seems to be the best and only way to encourage individuals to prevent infection, the only talk sanctioned by the Health and Human Services PSA is that dialogue which occurs between citizens and their government.

CONCLUSIONS

The consequence of our analysis is what Shapiro calls the literary explication of the mythologizing process in discourse--which not only creates subject, objects, and knowledge, but which creates them in such a way that seems natural and incontrovertible. "The literary reading reveals then a mythic story; it transforms an austerely written policy analysis into a legitimizing pamphlet, a celebration of part of the existing order (moreover, the part that is perhaps most difficult to celebrate from the point of view of values such as justice and fairness, etc.). This celebration is evident, not only when one takes the plot and the genre of the story as a whole. It is evident also when one does a closer, more detailed literary reading, paying attention to the lending discourses that govern the writing and produce kinds of subjects, objects and modes of conduct" (Shapiro, 1984, p. 246).

These literary details help to perpetuate a myth. And in fact the PSAs from the Ad Council and Health and Human Services Department do get the job done. Explicitly, the job is to educate. Implicitly, and more importantly, the job is to define and advocate a lifestyle based on the division of sexual preference.

It's possible that the mass media are simply unable to speak on the level of specificity needed to inform and educate the public. The most significant function the mass media can/will engage is in the delivery of a phone number. Beyond the educative function of the phone, the other avenues here seem to be educational films designed and shaped for specific psychographic and demographic audiences, and in fact this is the most recent direction the national health and gay organizations are taking.

In terms of future research for the communication scholar, two directions appear to have great potential. The first would be that of researching the power relationships and discursive practices in more detailed educational messages targeted at specific audiences. This will be useful in determining how messages can effectively inform and empower various groups. Here it becomes important to interview audience members in order to explore how they understand and interact with the messages which result in effective communication.

A second direction, one that is perhaps naive and idealistic, is research into ways of designing messages, primarily for a mass audience, which empower the voice of the gay community, and homosexuality as a lifestyle, in PSAs on AIDS. With the gay community's positive and effective response to the disease, homosexually-informed messages could offer an example of ways to change sexual behavior, regardless of sexual preference.

And in fact, if such a shift in messages is possible, communication researchers will have to begin where Shapiro does: at the level of discourse and knowledge/power relationships.

Until messages about AIDS are examined critically and politically, as we have tried to do in this study, the power to act as an agent in the fight against AIDS will remain primarily in the hands of governmentally-endorsed agencies which use AIDS education to ratify and legitimize a particular lifestyle.

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